

Shedding Light on the Beginnings of Islam

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Ignaz Goldziher, one of the “fathers” of Islamic Studies, started off a lecture, which he held in 1900 at the Sorbonne, with the sentence,

“For a long time we have been content with the simple assertion: All of a sudden Islam came into existence and immediately sprung up *into broad daylight*. (My emphasis, in the original: “au plein jour”).”¹

He warned against drawing on “*the abundant materials*” of Muslim tradition as the source for clarification of “*the early years of Islam*”.

“Modern historical criticism protects us from such an antediluvian method of approach.”

Historical criticism may still have been modern around 1900, but no longer after that. Goldziher’s warning against the easy way was not heeded and early history of Islam was and still is interpreted back from the *Sīrah* and *Ṭabarī*, despite all those reservations expressed incidentally and despite critical publications, which were not widely received.

However, the apparent *broad daylight* did not exist for the first two Muslim centuries, because the sources used are not conclusive. In the anthology “The Hidden Origins”,² a number of Western researchers of Islam have had a go at working on different aspects of this early history by means of historic criticism. The way was cleared to further analysis.

The present volume is continuing along this path. Since not only contemporary Muslim literary sources – apart from the *Qur’ān* – are missing, regarding the first two centuries, but also the Christian sources at the time report of *Arabs*, *Saracens*, *Ismaelites* and so forth, but not, however, of a *new religion* and a succession of events according to later Muslim historiography,³ a reconstruction of the actual development can only be achieved by falling back on the only dateable and locatable evidence: coins and inscriptions; this history is analyzed and illustrated by Volker Popp.⁴ Due to the scantiness of the symbols and texts documented in this fashion, obviously some statements concerning the question of detail remain hypothetical. However, it is still possible to identify the fundamentals of historical and theological development in the history of early Islam.

Coins make it clear that for a long time *muḥammad* was not a name, but a motto which puts the value of the Messiah Jesus, son of Mary – as in the

inscription on the Dome of the Rock –, right at the center of this both religious and political concept.

‘Abd al-Malik brought this concept from the regions of eastern Mesopotamia and it spread as far as West Syria. The motto *muhammad* was first historicized and considered to be a name during the 8th century and supported by a biography in the 9th century.⁵

Qur’anic Material, which retains a theology and a Christology of a pre-Nicean kind in its countries of origin, also came from the East to the West with ‘Abd al-Malik, and has developed further in isolation – in a sect-like manner.

In the time of ‘Abd al-Malik these originally Aramaic (and possibly Middle Persian) texts were transcribed into a kind of Arabic originating from Syria – a Syro-Aramaic mixed language.⁶ This “original Qur’ān”, of which the exact scope is unknown, was expanded during the 8th (and possibly also the 9th) centuries.

The Qur’anic material does not only have a history of the spoken word in Syriac, but had evidently been secured in written form before its transcription into Arabic.

By looking at errors which occurred during transcription, Christoph Luxenberg – in an ‘empirical’ manner – proves the existence of texts written in Syriac.⁷

More than a hundred years ago, Ignaz Goldziher already illustrated instances of the adoption of Persian concepts and notions into Islam.⁸ This trail has hardly been followed up at all. Here there is a definite deficit both in Christian historiography, in which there is no mention of inculturation of (Syrian and Arabian) Christianity into Persian culture to be found, and in Islamic Studies, which did not take up the idea of I. Goldziher. Volker Popp analyzes these influences using several illustrative examples.⁹

Previous analyses of the language of the Qur’ān will be reinforced by a comparative linguistic analysis by Markus Groß of records of both spoken and written texts from numerous cultures and religions and will therefore be put into a broader context.¹⁰

As a whole the political and religious development in the 7th and 8th centuries is quite complex. Many aspects have to be considered: the history of the Ancient Near East, the political and military conflicts between the Byzantines, the Sassanians, and the Arabs, the role of the peoples living in these realms, history of religions and missions, the varied cultural traditions and their influences beyond their original peoples and so forth. Thus many questions not only concerning details but also very central aspects cannot (yet) be answered.

However, there is a fundamental prospect of finding answers that are justifiable based on the historical-critical method, provided that research can avoid getting in the way of itself. This self-limitation essentially comes down to *not questioning* the fundamental theories of Islamic literature of the 3rd century AH (Islamic year), i.e., the 9th century CE, despite all reservations about its historic and religious validity. These tenets are the following:

- (1) The Qur'ān is attributed to the proclamation of the Prophet of the Arabs Muḥammed, who lived and preached from 570 to 632;
- (2) All of this took place on the Arabian peninsula, in Mecca and Medina;
- (3) The final version of the Qur'ān already existed soon after the death of the prophet;
- (4) Islam was already a complete new religion in the early 7th century;
- (5) The language of the Qur'ān is pure Arabic.

A scientific approach to these theories calls for them to be treated at least once with *systematic scepticism* and to check whether they can be verified using *contemporary* historical documents and the literary characteristics of the texts. If so, there would be a definite starting point; if not, research must endeavor to document, analyze, and interpret the source material still available.

This is what the present volume attempts to do. The whole work demonstrates how the beginnings of a Qur'ānic movement originated from a specific form of Christianity and came from regions much further east of Mesopotamia and not from the Arabian Peninsula. Basically after the victory of Heraclius in 622, and factually after the collapse of Sassanid rule, which happened soon after, this peculiar tradition was able to find its way from the East to the West, to Jerusalem and to Damascus, and was documented there in an Arabian-Syrian mixed language. Further complex, though to a certain extent understandable developments led to the formation of the *Šī'a* (Shi'ah), which initially was still characterized by Christian motives, and shortly afterwards to an independent religion (towards the end of the 8th and in the first decades of the 9th century). Traditional literature, which was shaped following Persian conceptual patterns, later on composed a splendid re-interpretation of these first two centuries of Islam from the perspective of the putative "knowledge" of its own time about the alleged origins of the religion.

Theological, and in this case Islamological analysis, only makes sense if methods are used which stand the test of historical criticism. Of course, mistakes may be made in the process which have to be corrected during one of the subsequent academic discussions. The authors of this volume are aware of this and do not consider their theories to be unalterable and the last word. They are, however, convinced that the contemporary sources available up to the present day provide the only (in the historical-critical sense) sound access to the earliest stages of the religious and political history of the 7th and 8th

centuries in the Ancient Near East and adjacent territories, its peculiarities and motives.

It must be mentioned that already in the 19th century there had been a series of valuable detailed analyses, which, however, often failed to understand the relevance of their own findings. If the authors of these studies themselves frequently did not draw the obvious conclusions, it is not surprising that their colleagues did so even less.

Self-limitation and the refusal to take into consideration what neighboring disciplines have found was and is another major obstacle in Islamic Studies. Only if History of Theology, Church History, Islamic Studies, Iranian Studies and philological and linguistic disciplines cooperate, can the phenomena to be analyzed be properly investigated, as the objects of research can hardly be assigned to only one field of research and thus have to be looked at from different angles. Interdisciplinary cooperation in terms of research is imperative for such questions.

The objective must be to understand historical phenomena as they originally were. Research is at no time concerned with damaging any religion, which, in this case, would be Islam. In comparative religious studies, all religions are analyzed theologically in this way, from religions of the past to religions of the present and those which have potential for the future. The Age of Enlightenment – after an initial phase of antagonism and disruptions – has not harmed Christianity, indeed, quite the opposite, it has facilitated its modernization; difficulties only occur with incidents of regression behind the critical level of knowledge already reached.

Understanding the historic beginnings – for Islamic Studies a given postulate from the start – will not harm Islam and its theology –, but could serve to bring it forward into a modern and pluralistic world.

Endnotes

Karl-Heinz Ohlig: Shedding Light on the Beginnings of Islam (p. 10-13)

- 1 Cf. among others: Ignaz Goldziher, *Islam and Parsism* (in the present anthology).
- 2 Karl-Heinz Ohlig/Gerd-R. Puin, *Die Dunklen Anfänge*. Neue Forschungen zur Entstehung und frühen Geschichte des Islam, Berlin 1,22005, 32007; English version: *The Hidden Origins of Islam: New Research into Its Early History*, Amherst (N.Y.) 2009 (Prometheus Books).
- 3 See my article in the present anthology “*Evidence of a New religion in Christian Literature ‘Under Islamic Rule?’*”
- 4 Cf. Volker Popp’s article in the present anthology: “*From Ugarit to Sāmarrā’ – An Archeological Journey on the Trail of Ernst Herzfeld.*”
- 5 Cf. my article “*From muḥammad Jesus to prophet of the Arabs – the Personalization of a Christological Predicate*” in the present anthology.
- 6 Cf. Christoph Luxenberg, *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran: A Contribution to the Decoding of the Language of the Koran*, Berlin 2007.
- 7 Cf.: Christoph Luxenberg’s article: “*Relics of Syro-Aramaic Letters in the early Qur’ān Code Ḥiḡāzī and Kūfī Ductus*” in the present anthology.
- 8 Cf. I. Goldziher, see above.
- 9 Cf. Volker Popp, “*The Influence of Persian Religious Patterns on Notions in the Qur’ān*” in the present anthology.
- 10 Cf. Markus Gross “*New Ways of Qur’ānic Research from the Perspective of Comparative Linguistics and Cultural Studies*” in the present anthology.